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Kerrey Rebuffed, Frustrated In Attempt To See Nuclear Targets Plan

by David Smalley

Before the end of his second and final term as a U.S. senator, Nebraska Democrat Bob Kerrey, who is retiring, was rebuffed in his attempts to discover who knows the targets of the nation's nuclear arsenal.

Kerrey, the ranking member of the Senate Intelligence Committee, conducted an ultimately quixotic quest to gain access to information about the nation's nuclear warfighting plan, known as the Single Integrated Operational Plan.

The senator's attempt to discover the targeting locations of nuclear arms owned by the United States, many of them controlled by various Air Force platforms, was spawned by his hunch that the answer might lead to the conclusion that fewer nuclear arms are necessary, according to a congressional source.

"Sen. Kerrey's theory was: If you actually saw the war plan -- 6,000 missiles pointed at Russia -- you'd say, 'gosh, do we really need this?'" the source told ITAF.

Kerrey was not only denied in his attempt to learn the targets of the nation's nuclear weapons, sources say, he was also led on a fruitless search to discover precisely whom is permitted access to such information, a search that culminated in a meeting with Defense Secretary William Cohen in October.

"For some time I have been asking for details of the targeting plan, but I have been told on every occasion that I am not entitled to know," Kerrey wrote Cohen after their meeting. "I believe strongly that no member of Congress should be denied this information."

"Further," he states in the Oct. 11 letter, "I believe the decision to limit access to the targeting plan does not make the United States more secure; it makes us less secure."

Steven Aftergood, the director of the Federation of American Scientists' government secrecy project, first reported on the letter in his Secrecy News, an e-mail newsletter.

A congressional source who witnessed the meeting between Kerrey and Cohen said that Cohen seemed genuinely sympathetic to the senator's request -- and baffled about the Pentagon policy covering who meets the "need to know" standard for the SIOP.

"[Cohen was] very up-front with Sen. Kerrey, and said 'We don't know'" the rationale behind the SIOP restrictions, the source told ITAF. "To be honest, my impression was that he thought it was reasonable for certain members of Congress to be briefed on that."

In his meeting with Cohen, and again in his letter to the defense secretary, Kerrey detailed the many differing replies he had received from different sources on why such information was being withheld.

"I am also troubled by the constantly changing rationale that has been given to me as to why Congress in not entitled to know," he wrote, noting that at one meeting alone, he was given three different reasons.

"With each answer there was an obvious response that demonstrated that the answer could not be supported," the letter noted. "The first answer was that they had not brought the detailed data. My response: let's reschedule the meeting."

"The second answer was there were people in the room who were not cleared for this information. My response: identify who they were and ask them to leave," he continued.

"The third answer was that only the gang of twelve in the House and Senate were cleared for this information. My response: I was in the gang of twelve and never received the briefing," he said.

The congressional source who described the scene to ITAF noted that still more reasons were given in subsequent days, and each was later corrected and revised. In the end, Kerrey requested the meeting with Cohen and sent the letter after the meeting to continue the pressure.

Cohen had not responded to Kerrey's letter by press time, according to the source, who noted that Kerrey's office "followed up on it so many times and never received a response."

Kerrey even had a staff member "create a chart" showing the different answers he received from seven different sources, the staffer said.

A Pentagon spokesman said a response to Kerrey's letter is "in the works -- but it has not been sent out."

A spokesman for Cohen told ITAF he did not know when the reply would be sent, nor what the response would be.

"I suspect there probably aren't any published guidelines" on who may have access to the information, he said. "I would presume it is only to those who have a need to know."

Asked for clarification on whom that would include, the spokesman said, "I'm not aware of any published guidelines."

The congressional source said this reply represents "an alteration of an 8th different answer" to the question of who is on the need-to-know list.

"The ultimate answer could be that they really don't know," he said. "There is certainly general confusion with the staff on the Hill, that I have seen, because no one has ever asked before."

Aftergood, an advocate for less government secrecy and clearer secrecy policies, believes

the issue of congressional access to SIOP information is a serious one.

"The issue is fundamental," he told ITAF. "It's whether we're going to have a democracy or not; whether our elected officials are in the loop or not."

Aftergood noted that "the country is gearing up for a nuclear posture review in 2001. The SIOP, the warfighting plan, is the driving force" in those discussions, he said.

"It's a great story and no one has picked up on it," he added.